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Farmers Branch book campaign helps South Texas children write a new chapter

12:00 AM CDT on Saturday, October 31, 2009

It's a 10-hour drive, with only a couple of stops along the way for gas or to grab a bite.

But the no-frills journey to Rio Grande City in South Texas has become the highlight of the year every holiday season for **Karen Furlong**, a Farmers Branch resident.

This year, she will drive down the week before [Christmas](#) to deliver almost 4,000 books to some of the poorest children in the country – those living in the *colonias* in Starr County along the U.S.-Mexico border.

"There are lots of kids there who live in nice homes and go to private or parochial schools," said Furlong, a flight attendant for a private jet company. "But there are just so many who don't, whose families had hoped for something better for their kids."

As Furlong sees it, books can open up worlds to kids who need to know their lives can be different. Most of the families in the *colonias* live with no sewer service and little health care. Schools in the area are not among the best-funded in the state.

Furlong envisions the day when she can drive a bus down and hand-deliver books to the children.

"The goals are getting bigger," she said. "But the basic aim is to get children to love reading. We know now that if they're not reading by third grade, we may have lost them."

Her love of books is what motivated her to start her passionate mission five years ago, when she began raising funds and collecting new books from relatives, friends, co-workers and businesses. Along the way, she's also collected new donors and a new publisher.

With Scholastic as her partner, she'll be able to buy several thousand new books this year. Last year, she bought 600. That means 3,000 kids will each get a book, and nine elementary school libraries may end up getting 100 new hardcover books each, she said.

Among these will be a Laura Ingalls Wilder set of *Little House* books for each library and *The Chalk Box Kid* by Clyde Robert Bulla for every fourth-grader.

She also hopes to buy children's books by Pura Belpré Award winners – outstanding Latino/Latina writers and illustrators whose work celebrates Latino culture.

The public can send donations to Starr Readers at Chase Bank, 9140 Forest Lane, Dallas, TX 75243. Or check out www.starrreaders.com.

Each year brings a greater number of supporters and bigger rewards, and Furlong takes another step toward becoming a nonprofit organization.

Every dollar donated goes toward book purchases, she said. She and her family pay for the gas and the cost of renting a vehicle.

It's worth it, in her eyes.

"I love the place," she said, having spent summers and holidays there with her grandparents.

"I know it's poor, and it's dusty. But those little towns along the border – they're a part of Texas, too."